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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the factors involved in the dissatisfaction theory of local school governance. This theory holds that change in school board policy comes about through voter dissatisfaction expressed at the polls, since there is no other way for citizens to express their desires. School board "culture" dictates that the board behave in an elite, unresponsive fashion. The author lists five statements that describe the processes of dissatisfaction theory. (1) There is a culture of school boards that dictates that boards operate in elite fashion. (2) Since most communities are multicultural and varied, it is unlikely that a single point of view about public education will be satisfying over long periods of time. (3) The board and the superintendent view themselves and are seen by the public as a single policy-making unit. (4) The public will turn to the ballot box in an attempt to unseat an incumbent and elect a board member who represents their positions. (5) A new school board member elected because of community dissatisfaction will usually carry a mandate to "get rid" of the superintendent. (Author/DS)

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ELITE-ARENA COUNCIL BEHAVIOR AND SCHOOL BOARDS

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Introduction

A decade of research and theory building, described by the general term "Dissatisfaction Theory in Local School Governance" was reported in an AERA symposium two years ago. The thrust of that research and theory is based on the premise and observation that during identifiable periods of time and under certain circumstances a local school board behaves in a particular fashion, as they develop public policy in education, that results in considerable citizen dissatisfaction, community-board conflict, incumbent school board member defeat and superintendent turnover. Additionally, as this series of events is played out in the politics of education the succession of the new superintendent provides an opportunity and mandate for policy changes which brings about a policy output more in line with community aspirations and desires, resulting in a new period of equilibrium. Thus, it describes a theory of democratic political process, that can and in fact does require responsiveness within public education.

The specific indicators (social-economic-political of community change and response indicators of the local board) are symptomatic of the condition

and not likely causative. To put it another way these indicators can be shown to be related to incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover but no one really expects that those variables are the ones that affect or cause the conflict and political changes.

Explanatory Relationships

Theoretically the process operates in approximately the following fashion. For a period of time a school board and its chief administrator operate in their policy output and implementation in a fashion that is satisfactory or at least reasonably non-controversial for the majority of the citizens of the district. Then for some reason the public begins to ask and finally demand certain policy changes. Operating in typical fashion the board and the administration reject these attempts to influence and bring about change. As these attempts are unsuccessful the public becomes increasingly frustrated and discontented. Finding no way to influence the incumbent school board the public moves in increasing numbers to the voting booth in an effort to elect board members who will represent their point of view in public policy decisions. The question remains, however, as to why school boards appear to be so impervious to public desires and attempts to influence their decisions, short of incumbent defeat.

Blanchard (1974) has pointed out that the vast majority of school board members believe that they are under no obligation to behave, as school board members, based on the wishes of the public. He found that 87% of the school board members he surveyed in Kentucky said they voted as they felt best even if that was opposed to what the public wished. This finding was substantiated in Pennsylvania by the work of Edgren (1976). On the surface such behavior

is difficult to account for, coming from public officials who depend on the ballot box for their office. Given this condition it is easier to explain the incumbent defeat phenomena that it is to explain why it takes so long to occur.

The Culture of School Boards

Lutz (1975) attempted to explain the conditions that lead to and support this non-responsiveness of school boards by positing a culture of school boards. He suggested that, over the last century, a set of norms, values, beliefs and expectations has developed about school boards and their members. These are widely shared, supported by the literature in school administration and school boards, and the precepts of reform government in education. Thus, the culture of school boards holds that education is too important to become a political affair and that school board members are trustees for the public and not representives of the public. New board members are acculturated, upon their election, through a planned process that inducts the new school board members into the culture of school boards and transforms them into "true believers." The norms of the culture instruct the board member to avoid representing any group within the school district and do what is good for every pupil in spite of the wide differences in needs, aspirations, culture, ability and desires within the population. As most school board members are drawn from the middle and upper classes of the society, school board policy, operating in such a fashion and based on what the board thinks best, is likely to enhance middle and upper class, "mainstream America" and disadvantage others.

Additionally, seeking to operate in trusteeship for a public it assumes to be monolithic, the board is admonished by its cultural norms to seek

concensus in private, avoid public conflict, and the public debate of controversial issues. Thus, those who attempt to influence school boards in directions other than the ones school boards are predisposed to take, find their efforts thwarted. Most often such persons and groups are labeled as malcontents and not representive of the generalized public. If the change oriented public finds an occasional friend on the board, that member can be expected to represent the public's view in private session, but retire in favor of the majority board opinion,and in order to preserve concensus (which the culture demands) vote against the public's wishes in public session. Is it any surprise that the public feels unrepresented?

As community pressure builds some board members begin to lose confidence in the administration, which is almost their sole source of information and alternatives, but they remain 'true believers' in the norms of the culture. This condition generates conflict within the board as well as between the board and the community. But no alternatives exist within the culture of school boards. The board is still compelled to reach concensus, act only on administratively proposed recommendations, and behave as trustees rather than representives. Research,based on a model provided by F. G. Bailey (1965),has provided some tentative answers to the process of dissatisfaction and political action described above.

Elite and Arena Councils

Bailey and several of his colleagues in political-anthropology have studied governing councils (other than school boards) using a model of council behavior that is described on a continuum from elite to arena council behavior, (See Richards and Kuper 1971).

Elite Councils:

1. Reach decisions in private, the minority acceeding to the majority to preserve concensus, and enact the decision in public by unanimous vote.
2. Think of themselves as trustees, apart from and separate from the public for whom they are the guardians of the trusteeship.
3. Operate with the executive-administrative function being an integrated part of the council so that concensus is required if anything is to get done.

Arena Councils:

1. Debate issues publicly and decide publicly by majority vote.
2. Think of themselves as representives of the public and act as "community in council".
3. Constitute the executive function apart from the council, holding administration responsible for effecting the majority decision.

Any council, including school boards can be placed and a continuum ranging from more elite to more arena. It seems clear the elite council behavior is dictated by the culture of school boards and the great majority of school boards function as elite councils.

Anomic School Boards

During a six month study of two school boards, using participant observer methods, Gresson (1976) observed an elite and an arena school board. He discovered that things went smoothly in the elite board. There was little community conflict and no conflict within the board. When community pressure was brought to bear on the board or the superintendent there was complete

solidary and protection of each individual and the decision making body, including the superintendent. Additionally, the superintendent often acted for the board thus "saving" the board the problem of making the decision.

In the arena board there was considerable inter-board conflict. Issues were debated publicly. Decisions were made by non-unanimous votes. There was constant conflict between the board and the superintendent. Community-board conflict was high; in fact, the community conflict was the major factor in producing the arena type behavior. Due to the wide disagreements among segments of the public, certain board members no longer felt they could defend concensus on the board nor engage in a blind support of the superintendent. Still locked in the culture of school boards, however, this arena board felt very uneasy about their inability to reach concensus and their lack of complete trust of the superintendent. They often expressed their unhappiness with this condition. They said they really did not think of themselves as representives of the public and often were unsure of how to behave in board meetings. This condition was identified as anomic behavior; lacking in norms that sanctioned, supported, or guided their behavior. Following the theory of such societies, it was suggested that this board was organizationally suicidal and that incumbents would soon be replaced and the superintendent would soon lose his job. Both predictions were born out within the year.

Studying thirty selected school boards in Pennsylvania, Whittmer (1976) statistically identified five anomic school boards. These boards were all at least one and a half standard deviations above the mean of the thirty boards in the number of decisions made by non-unanimous votes. They tended to be arena boards as they did not decide by concensus. However, they continued to express the elite norms of being trustees rather than representives of the public, believing that they <u>should</u> obtain concensus (although they

tended not to) and being uneasy about their lack of complete confidence in and support of their superintendent. Their scores on the elite-arena value scale were one and a half standard deviations from the mean of the thirty boards and toward the elite value end of the scale. Apparently these boards, although arena boards, still believed in the norms, values and customs dictated by the culture of school boards but found themselves unable to live according to these norms. They can be termed as anomic and one can predict incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover in these districts.

An Explanatory Model of Conflict and Political Defeat

Perhaps the above descriptions are instructive in making clinical guesses about possible explanatory relationships within the dissatisfaction theory of local governance. The following statements seem descriptive of this process:

1. There is a culture of school boards that dictates that school boards operate in elite fashion.

This culture has developed in response to the drive for reform government in education. That movement has tended to remove public policy in education from the general politics of American democracy. It has established an elite system of decision-making seated within a system of select trustees and professionals, delibertly removed from the direct influence of the people. It has cultivated a set of deeply held beliefs, norms, values and behaviors making school board members trustees and guardians for the people and who believe they know better than the people what is best for the people about matters in public education. The culture denigrates any board member who attempts to represent a group of citizens, labeling such board members as low level politicians, uninterested in 'good' education. Within this culture

school boards have little choice but to function as eltie boards. When forced to arena behavior they become normless and anomic.

2. Given the diversity of the public which many school boards serve, or the likelihood that the public changes over a period of time, it is unlikely that any single decision will be satisfactory to everyone or that a single point of view about public education will be satisfying over long periods of time.

The American society is multi-cultural, holding different values, abilities, backgrounds, aspirations and often having widely different needs. Even the most homogeneous community occasionally changes due to in-or out-migration, changing property values and economic shifts, to mention but a few indicies. The consensual decision made by the best intended school board is hardly likely, under these circumstances, to satisfy all persons or groups in most communities, particularly diverse cosmopolitan, urban communities. Yet those who feel disadvantaged by the consensual decision see no one who can or wants to support their position or meet their needs; and little hope of influencing the present school board.

3. Included in the culture of school boards is the superintendent. Neither the board nor the superintendent see themselves, nor are they viewed by the public, as independent in the process of the policy making and implementation.

The public views policy decisions as the combined operational output of the board and the superintendent. If the decisions are good, if they are satisfied; the board and the superintendent are good. The antithesis is also true. When the output is bad, both the board and the superintendent are bad.

4. Having little or no influence on the present school board and seeing no apparent opportunity to change that situation, the public will turn to the ballot box in an effort to unseat an incumbent and elect a board member who represents their position.

This represents the focal point of the dissatisfaction theory of democratic participation in school governance. Regardless of the sacred and protective nature of local school governance most school boards are elected. When dissatisfaction and influence cannot be made operational through other means, the ballot box remains. Given the culture of school boards and the elite council behavior it dictates, incumbent defeat is often the only effective means of influence, if in fact the means of last resort. Frustrated with their failure to influence the present board, groups seek and elect individuals to the board who they think will better represent their point of view when enacting public policy in education. Given that these new members will soon be acculturated, believing in the values of the culture of the school board, the public will, after a period of time, again be faced with the same problem.

5. As the public, the board and the superintendent view the board and the superintendent as one impregnable decision-making system, a new school board member elected because of this dissatisfaction process will normally carry a mandate to "get rid" of the present superintendent.

This postulate requires little explanation. As the school board policy making tends to be an elite process, requiring the confidence and consent of all the school board and the superintendent, nothing is likely to change until a new superintendent is on the scene. The arrival of a new superintendent provides the opportunity for a policy shift toward the norms, values and

aspirations of the insurgent group who thought themselves disadvantaged by the old system and were successfull in ousting an incumbent or several incumbents on the old board.

These five postulates describe the explanatory interrelationships underlying the dissatisfaction theory of democratic participation in local school governance. They rest within a theory of culture, culture conflict and culture change. The critical factor is a culture of the school board which does not permit school board members to even think of themselves as representives of the pluralistic public, much less act as their representives. As long as the culture of school boards continues to exist unamended an effective process of participation will continue through public dissatisfaction, frustration with attempts to influence, political action at the polls resulting in incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover. If and when the culture of school boards is amended to permit arena behavior, without creating an anomic condition on the school board, this dissatisfaction theory will have to be amended also. Until then it appears to account for conflict in and the most effective means of public participation in local school policy making.

Other Explanations

Certain other theories of politics in local schools have attempted to account for democratic participation and conflict in educational politics. Dale Mann (1976) has suggested a process of public participation and administrative representation in the formulation of local education policy. This administrative representation theory views the school administration, particularly the principal, as a person who may represent the public served by the local school. While accounting many interesting variables in the schooling process, the theory has failed, in our view to recognize one important fact. School

principals are not elected officials. They might better be viewed as the appointed ward and precinct delegates of the power wielders of the sacred political machine governing the local schools. In this sense we do not use the term machine to refer to an immoral, self seeking, boss dominated and politically corrupt, party oriented government. Rather it refers to a system that produces policy decisions and programs in a bureaucratic and machine-like fashion.

If principals are the appointed officers of the machine, the extent to which they can represent the public, in opposition to the policies of the machine, good or bad, is problematic. The power group, the machine, the school board and superintendent in this case, can and often does replace the principal (the precinct leader) who insists on representing a group of people in opposition to the policies of the school board. Where does this leave the public and the principal? The principal looks for a new job and the public is again forced to express their dissatisfaction at the ballot box.

Summary

In the final analysis the public participates, if it wishes, and to the extent it is dissatisfied, at the polls. This process of the election of public representives to govern in the place of the individual and as a substitute for direct participatory democracy, is in the best tradition of American representive democracy. It provides the most functional and effective means of democracy yet developed for modern mass society. It works, perhaps in a painfully slow and cumbersome way, but it works!!

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